

# Teaching Complexity: Narrative Journalism and Immersive Storytelling

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The disconnect first struck me in 2016 when English students were subjected to the seemingly insurmountable task of writing an essay on *Time and Distance Overcome* by Eula Biss. The chronological structure, indirect mode of argumentation and use of extended metaphor in *Time and Distance Overcome* left students frustrated and perplexed.

By a crude estimate, 95% of the nonfiction we read online are news items based on the inverted triangle and meant to be gulped down in easily digestible scoops. In class, we tend to focus on the genres most likely to show up at the exam, or political speeches with similar structures and an obvious use of rhetorical devices. But this, I think, is really doing both ourselves and our students a disservice.

So how do we address the disconnect? How do we teach complexity?

## Teaching Beyond Boundaries

Perhaps the solution comes in the form of narrative – or literary – journalism?<sup>1</sup> “Beyond all notions of right and wrong there’s a field. I’ll meet you there,” says 13th-century Persian mystic Rumi. In a similar field beyond narrow confines of genre, narrative journalism offers a chance to show students that analyzing nonfiction is much more than noting the use anaphora and modes of appeal.<sup>2</sup>

Obviously, teaching complexity by working with complexity comes with its own challenges. Students are befuddled by the fact that the same concepts they know from working with fiction are now applied to nonfiction. It is not obvious that storytelling can be a form of argumentation (how do you fit that into Toulmin?), neither is the idea that logos is not just about referring to statistics or that the ethos of the journalist may shine through in the narrative point of view.

Narrative journalism is an umbrella term for reportage that moves past the inverted news triangle and “displays storytelling techniques to report upon real-world events and situations.” As a genre, it employs “the narrative storytelling techniques of voice, point of view, character, setting, plot, and/or chronology to report on reality through a subjective filter. This filter can be either a character or the journalist.”<sup>3</sup>

When dealing with narrative journalism in class, I often begin by defining the rhetorical situation. Using the rhetorical pentagon to situate the text clearly within the boundaries of nonfiction helps students see that the analytical vocabulary they normally reserve for fiction may be applied equally to “real world” texts.

## Immersive experiences

In my experience, students usually take well to working with narrative journalism, because it offers an experience which is much more engaging than the typical political speech or commencement address.

Most people probably associate storytelling in nonfiction with ruminative essays or the New Journalism of the 1960s, but the term covers a far more expansive field of writing. *The People of the Abyss*<sup>4</sup>, Jack London's sprawling account from 1903 of life in late-Victorian East End is a form of narrative journalism. So is *The Harvest Gypsies*, John Steinbeck's series of articles on migrant workers in California during the Great Depression, which went on to inform *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Joan Didion is a narrative journalist and so – to no less extent – is Eileen McNamara, who won the Pulitzer Prize for Commentary in 1996<sup>5</sup>. Her very personal column "I still have no answer" relates remembered details of a murder in a quietly angry voice which draws the reader into the haunting narrative:

*"It was dark and the streets were slick by the time I headed home. My walk up Revere Street from the Charles Street T station was more like a slide. I kept my head down, scanning the brick sidewalks for the icy patch that my mother warned would send me flying in my impractical shoes.*

*Police think Kathleen's killer might have been fleeing as I was inching my way up the hill. Had someone passed me? Did I see anyone leaving the building? Running up or down the hill?*

*I am still saddened to say, Mrs. Welsh<sup>6</sup>, that I saw only my shoes, the bricks and the front doorstep of our apartment house where I did slip, at last. I fell against the heavy front door. It gave way against my shoulder, sending me stumbling into the hall.*

*How many times had we complained about that unreliable lock?"<sup>7</sup>*

Journalists who make narrative and storytelling part of their work, often spend years on painstaking research. This level of commitment combined with storytelling takes the audience into settings full of relatable characters, language, and dialogue.

In her work, the American journalist Anne Hull sets "a goal of intimacy" and strives to "think like a photographer. Watch. Change location. At a family dinner, change your place around the dining table. Keep moving, keep shifting your point of view, and keep quiet. Try not to interrupt the flow of events."<sup>8</sup>

As a result, the audience is thrown into an immersive experience brimming with emotion and suspense.

## Setting the Scene

If Anne Hull thinks like a photographer then Gay Talese may well be director of the film.

In the winter of 1965, writer Gay Talese arrives in Los Angeles with an assignment from Esquire Magazine to profile Frank Sinatra. The legendary singer is approaching fifty, under the weather and unwilling to be interviewed. So Talese remains in L.A., hoping Sinatra might recover and reconsider, and he begins talking to many of the people around Sinatra—his friends, his associates, his family, his countless hangers-on — and observing the man himself wherever he can. The result, "Frank Sinatra

has a Cold" has become one of the most celebrated magazine stories ever published, a pioneering example of New Journalism—a work of rigorously faithful fact enlivened with the kind of vivid storytelling that had previously been reserved for fiction.

[IMAGE 1: GAY TALESE MANUSCRIPT FOR SCENE 1 OF FRANK SINATRA HAS A COLD]

The opening lines read like the beginning of a crime novel and from this point Talese builds his portrait in scenes replete with dialogue, characters, and dramatic tension. His extraordinary research gives him the insight of an omniscient narrator and by writing in the voice of Raymond Chandler's hardboiled detectives, Talese develops the image of an entertainer with the powerful reach and volatile personality of the Godfather – *Il Padrone*:

*"Frank Sinatra, holding a glass of bourbon in one hand and a cigarette in the other, stood in a dark corner of the bar between two attractive but fading blondes who sat waiting for him to say something. But he said nothing; he had been silent during much of the evening, except now in this private club in Beverly Hills he seemed even more distant, staring out through the smoke and semidarkness into a large room beyond the bar where dozens of young couples sat huddled around small tables or twisted in the center of the floor to the clamorous clang of folk-rock music."*

"Frank Sinatra has a Cold" foregrounds many of the most important features in narrative journalism. The point of view is subjective, but nothing is fictitious; every detail of Talese's portrait stems from meticulous observation, every line of dialogue is reported down to the tiniest inflection of the speaker's voice and every conjecture is based in fact.

## Dreams of the Disenfranchised

Without a doubt, one of my favorite writers is Anne Hull. As a journalist Hull is mainly known for her narrative serials about poor and disenfranchised people in the US – including mistreated veterans at Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington and young gays in the Bible Belt.<sup>9</sup>

[IMAGE 2: ANNE HULL US-MEXICAN BORDER]

Studies indicate that journalistic narratives have a stronger engaging effect on audience members than non-narratives, both in terms of feeling 'present' at the described scenes and in terms of identifying and empathizing with the story characters. Using a narrative template with recognizable characters is seen as a powerful means to (a) increase the audience's understanding of society in all its complexities and (b) enhance the audience's sense of being part of that society.<sup>10</sup>

When it comes to engaging the audience and relating social complexities, Anne Hull's spectacular investigation of migrant workers takes pride of place. "Una Vida Mejor: A Better Life" offers a plethora of possibilities with regard to stylistic analysis, language listening and use of literary devices as it follows a group of Mexican women who journey north to shuck blue crabs as "guest workers" on the North Carolina coast. "PART 1: Leaving Palomas" begins like this (notice how the introductory paragraph sets the scene and defines the scope like in a traditional news article only to be immediately replaced by something that resembles a novel opening *in medias res*):

*“They are human capital, ordered like product and shipped in for a season. A handful of women from a windblown village in Mexico set out for a better life - una vida mejor - on the back roads of the new world economy.*

*It was early afternoon when the girl stepped into the shade of Senor Herrera's small store. She unfolded her mother's shopping list and set it on the wooden counter. A hot wind blew outside.”<sup>11</sup>*

From this vantage point, Hull weaves a story worthy of John Steinbeck and Jack London. And we are far from fiction. Hull definitely has a rhetorical purpose and crafts her indictment of capitalism with a great deal of authority, building a strong argument through her use of storytelling. “Una Vida Mejor” reads like a precursor to the America of Donald Trump and Jeff Bezos with its vicious border policies, Amazon warehouses and disillusioned middle class. It also offers road less travelled into familiar themes like the American Dream or the US-Mexican Border.

## **Meanwhile in Cleveland, Ohio**

The brilliant thing about classics is that they have the capacity to overcome time and distance. Yet the most compelling forms of literary journalism right now have found their way to other media. Most of you are probably familiar with the podcast *This American Life*, but recently I have found a great deal of pleasure in its relatives *The Serial Podcast* and *White Parents*. Just have your students listen to the first few minutes of *Season Three: Episode 01 of The Serial Podcast: A Bar Fight Walks into the Justice Center* and spend the next 30 minutes discussing the elevator metaphor!

The longform feature “Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek” by John Branch is another piece of narrative journalism which uses digital technology to take storytelling to the next level. Through narrative writing, video-interviews, 3D-animation, image galleries and documentary, Branch tells the story of 16 professional skiers who suddenly saw their pristine powder become a mortal enemy.

The work of John Branch creates a fully immersive experience which draws the reader into the dramatic tensions of the narrative, provides background information and visually sets the scene. In contrast to regular hyper-text where links often become a distraction, the interactive elements in “Snow Fall” seem to reinforce the reader’s sense of connection. Studies of reader interaction in this context show that the eye is equally drawn to text and images. This suggests that narrative is a powerful medium and writing is still an important source of information.

Teaching complexity through complexity may seem like a daunting task. However, working with narrative journalism in English invites the students to employ skills from virtually every corner of the analytical toolbox in relation to nonfiction. While some students may struggle to master this, it is not necessarily *more difficult* than spotting the difference between alliteration and anaphora – and it might shift focus onto nuanced understanding of texts.

Just remember beyond all notions of right and wrong there’s a field. I’ll meet you there.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Rie Pedersen: *Fortællende journalistik* provides a solid introduction to the genre in Danish: <https://gyldendal-uddannelse.dk/products/fortaellende-journalistik-bog-13543-9788702038576> (Visited: 13-08-2020)

<sup>2</sup> Nanna Flindt Kreiner: "Analyse af sagprosa: Mere end anaforer og appelformer. *AngloFiles* 194, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Kobie van Krieken and José Sanders: "What is Narrative Journalism: A Systematic Review and Empirical Agenda" (Sage Journals, July 2019): <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1464884919862056> (Visited: 08-08-2020)

<sup>4</sup> Jack London: *The People of the Abyss* (1903). Full text available at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1688/1688-h/1688-h.htm> (Visited: 13-08-2020)

<sup>5</sup> The website of The Pulitzer Prizes is a vast resource of brilliant nonfiction, historical themes and images: <https://www.pulitzer.org/> (Visited: 13-08-2020)

<sup>6</sup> McNamara's column is directly addressed to the victim's mother, Mrs Welsh.

<sup>7</sup> Eileen McNamara: "I still have no answer" (Boston Globe, December 1996). Full text and background available at: <https://www.pulitzer.org/article/murder-remembered> (Visited: 09-08-2020)

<sup>8</sup> Morten Mølgaard Pedersen: "Nonfiction i engelsk: Lær dine elever at skrive med sanserne": <https://www.inkshed.dk/2020/03/02/nonfiction-journalism-anne-hull/> (Visited: 10-08-2020)

<sup>9</sup> Read excerpts and find links to the full stories by Anne Hull here: <https://www.inkshed.dk/2020/03/02/nonfiction-journalism-anne-hull/> (Visited: 13-08-2020)

<sup>10</sup> Kobie van Krieken and José Sanders: "What is Narrative Journalism: A Systematic Review and Empirical Agenda" (Sage Journals, July 2019): <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1464884919862056> (Visited: 08-08-2020)

<sup>11</sup> Anne Hull: "Una Vida Mejor: A Better Life" (ST. PETERSBURG (Florida) TIMES, May 9,10 and 11, 1999) Text available for download at: [https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwj-sfbg0Y3rAhUFsKQKHeV7CnkQFjACegQIBBAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fabrahamson.medill.northwestern.edu%2FWWW%2FIALJS%2FHull\\_ABetterLife\\_StPeteTimes.doc&usq=AOvVaw15qV01qFbifUwESrRkO67I](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwj-sfbg0Y3rAhUFsKQKHeV7CnkQFjACegQIBBAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fabrahamson.medill.northwestern.edu%2FWWW%2FIALJS%2FHull_ABetterLife_StPeteTimes.doc&usq=AOvVaw15qV01qFbifUwESrRkO67I) (Visited: 09-08-2020)